This article was originally published by IIASA Research Center.

This material has been reviewed and forwarded for publishing and distribution by the English language section of the Department of Islamic Resources.

Form #: 3717
Date: 19/8/1425

If you have any corrections, comments, or questions about this publication, please feel free to contact us at:

ipc@islamway.net

The Fast

Dr. Ja`far Sheikh Idris

The Nature of Acts of Worship

God created us so we may worship Him. To help us achieve this purpose, He instilled the worship of Him in our very nature and made it the essence of our humanity, so much so that we can be really human only if we worship Him; otherwise, we live an alienated life. He then taught us, through the medium of human messengers, how best to serve Him.

Worship is essentially a state of the heart, but the relationship between our bodies and our minds is so strong that the state of the one is bound to have an effect on the state of the other.

God, who created us and who knows best the nature of this relationship, explained to us not only how to worship Him in our hearts but also how to deal with our bodies in ways which accord well with and enhance the mental state of worship. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), whom God set as an example for us to follow in worshipping Him, said,

> **"Pray as you see me praying" (recorded by al-Bukhari)**

…and also,

> **"Take your pilgrimage rituals from me" (recorded by Muslim)**

Hence the insistence of our scholars on the importance of the external actions, an insistence which might seem at first sight to be an undue emphasis on formalities that do not make any real difference to the essence of worship. People who thus belittle the external aspect of worship do not pay enough attention to the importance of that strong mutual relationship between our bodies and our minds. Of course, these external acts only have value if they are accompanied and driven by a sincere feeling of worship in the heart; otherwise they become hollow movements that even a hypocrite can perform. But anyone who has performed them with a sincere feeling of submission and gratitude to God knows their great value. He knows their value because he experiences in his heart the difference they make therein. Our

feelings of love and fear of God, of gratitude and submission to Him naturally precede our coming to pray to Him (standing, kneeling, prostrating, and reciting the Qur`aan), our coming to fast (depriving ourselves of food, drink and sex during the specified times), and our coming to perform the rituals of pilgrimage. Every sincere worshipper can speak of how feelings of gratitude and submission to God were intensified and enhanced after the performance of the external acts of worship.

Divine messages give us guidance not only about how to worship God but also about when and where to do so. The Qur`aan states,

> **"And your Lord creates whatsoever He wills and chooses." (26:68)**

The chosen or preferred creation includes not only the living and the inanimate, but times and places as well. Since we have been created to serve God, then every legitimate act of ours, even sexual intercourse with our wives, can be an act of worship; but there are certain acts which have been especially prescribed by God as acts of worship. These acts are the life force and nourishment of our faith; without them faith fades and finally dies away. It is for these special acts that God specified the forms, times and places He knows to be most appropriate for them.

Why Fast?

Fasting is one of these special acts just referred to; it is, in fact, one of the five important acts of worship called the pillars of Islam. The other four are the profession of faith - there is no god (worthy of worship) except Allah (the one true God) and Muhammad is His Messenger, - the five daily prayers, the payment of the poor due (zakat) and the pilgrimage (hajj). These different acts of worship are to the soul as food is to the body. All kinds of food, like proteins, fats and carbohydrates, serve to make the body healthy, but each one contributes to one's health in a special way, and plays a role that cannot be fully played by the others in achieving that purpose. Similarly, all the acts of worship help to keep our souls sound and healthy by instilling taqwa [in general, it means 'God consciousness,' 'God awareness,' 'fear of God,' and so on] in them, but each has a special role to play in this process, and people who perform these experience in their hearts the special character of the feelings they engender.

When we fast - the Islamic way - we abstain from food, drink, and sexual intercourse from dawn to sunset. We do this for the sake of God and in obedience to Him. We thus make a clear statement that our real submission is to God and not to the temptations of our bodies however strong they may be. And for this God gives us a special reward. The Prophet (ﷺ) stated,

> **"In paradise there are eight gates among which is a gate called al-Rayyaan which only those who fast will enter." (Recorded by al-Bukhari and Muslim)**

And every good deed will be rewarded ten-fold, save for fasting, about which Allah stated,

> **"Is done only for my sake and I shall reward it." (Recorded by al-Bukhari and Muslim)**

Fasting is good not only for our souls but also for our bodies. It helps to make us healthier. Furthermore, abstention from food and drink

for a number of days increases will power and weakens the sexual desire. Therefore, it is especially recommended for young men who are not able to marry.

Kinds of Fasting

Fasting, like the other special acts of worship, is one of two kinds: one obligatory and the other recommended. The form of the fasting is the same; it is only the days of fasting which differ. Fasting is always during daytime. It starts from dawn and ends at sunset. During this period of the day one abstains completely from eating, drinking and sexual intercourse.

But this by itself is not sufficient. One also has to abstain from all kinds of sins, like foul language, backbiting, drinking, lying, prohibited listening, and dealing in unlawful items like drugs, wine and pork.

The fasting which is a pillar of Islam is a fasting of every day of the lunar month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar Islamic calendar. Why this month in particular? Because it is a special month. It is, in fact, the best of all of the months of the year and one of its nights, the night of Qadr, is the best of all nights of the year. It is for this reason that the Qur`aan was sent down on that night. Thus when God urged the faithful to fast during the month of Ramadan, He endeared it to them by reminding them that it was the month in which the Qur`aan was sent down, as a guidance to people, a Book that contains clear evidence of the truth of that guidance, and a criterion of discrimination between truth and falsehood (this is a paraphrase of the Qur`aanic verse 2:185)

People Exempted From Fasting

The fasting of Ramadan is obligatory on all adult and sane Muslims, except those for whom it is too difficult or harmful to do so. They include the following categories of people:

a) Persons traveling and the ill whose illness can be made worse by fasting. It is not recommended for such people to fast but if they do so, it will be accepted from them. If they choose to heed the recommendation and not fast, they must fast an equal number of days after Ramadan to make up for the days they missed.

b) Menstruating women and women with post-partum bleeding are not allowed to fast and it will not be considered valid if they do. But they also must make up for the days in which they did not fast.

c) Pregnant and nursing women, if they fear that fasting can be harmful to their children or to themselves, need not fast. If they don't fast, they must make up for the days on which they break the fast. In addition, they must feed a poor person for every day that they broke their fast if they broke it because they feared only for the health of their children.

d) People who are not capable of fasting, either due to old age or incurable diseases, are not to fast. It is enough for them to feed one poor person for each of the days in which they fail to fast. The more people they feed the better.

Acts Which Nullify the Fast

Most important among the acts which nullify the fast are the following:

a) Sexual intercourse during the daytime breaks the fast and is a grave sin. Anyone who performs this act must atone for it by freeing a slave, if he can afford to do so; otherwise, he should fast two consecutive months, if he can. If not, then he must feed sixty poor persons if he is able to.

b) Intentionally eating or drinking also breaks the fast. If this act is done unintentionally, though, it does not harm the fast

c) The appearance of menstrual or post-partum bleeding immediately breaks the fast. Once this happens, even if it is just a few minutes before sunset, the fast is nullified and the day must be made up at a later date.

d) Ejaculation, if it comes as a result of an intentional act, breaks the fast.

e) Deliberate vomiting also breaks the fast.

f) The injection of blood or any other nourishing liquid into the body nullifies the fast.

g) Apostasy from Islam obviously breaks the fast. If a fasting Muslim says or does something which is judged to be a violation of his faith, he thereby nullifies his fast and has therefore to make up the day or days of his apostasy, if he happens to repent and return to the faith.

Recommended Acts

The fasting Muslim is recommended to follow the Sunnah of the Prophet (his customs and manners) in doing the following acts:

(a) Eating before the break of dawn is recommended act. This makes fasting easier and is, therefore, recommended to be as late as possible, such a just before the call for the dawn prayer.

(b) It is also recommended to break the fast immediately after sunset.

(c) Also one should be more active in doing all kinds of good deeds, foremost of which is the performing of the five daily prayers at their proper times in congregation with other Muslims and the giving of the poor-due (zakat). Besides the obligatory prayers and zakat, one should try as much as one can to do more of the non-obligatory but recommended prayers, specially the Taraweeh prayers during the evening, on the night of Qadr in particular, and being more generous in helping the poor and in all ways of promoting the cause of Islam. One should also spend more time reciting the Qur`aan and pondering over the meanings of its verses, and turn as often as possible to God, asking Him to bestow His peace and blessings on the Prophet as well as asking for one's forgiveness and the forgiveness of his brother Muslims.

(d) One also should not answer back anyone who insults him but should only respond, **"I am fasting."**

(e) It is also recommended to offer specific supplications at the time of breaking the fast. It has been reported that the Prophet (ﷺ) said,

> **"O Lord, it is for you that I have offered my fasting and it is with provision from you that I am breaking the fast. Accept (this fast) from me therefore, you are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing."**

…or the person may say, as the Prophet also said,

“Thirst has gone, the arteries are moist and the reward is sure, if God will.” (Recorded by al-Daraqutni)

(f) To break the fast with some fresh dates if available, otherwise with any available sweet fruits like grapes, is considered a recommended act. “The Prophet’s Sunnah was to eat, wear and ride whatever was available in his land, of whatever Allah made permissible. Therefore, anyone who uses what is available in his land would be following the Sunnah.” [Ibn Taimiyah]

(g) One should try to invite others, especially the poor, for the meal that one breaks the fast.

(h) Finally, it is encouraged to spend the last ten days of Ramadan in seclusion in a mosque. This practice is called I`tikaf, a state of complete devotion to worship. Persons in this state are not allowed to leave the mosque except for personal necessities. Similarly, they are not allowed to have sex with their spouses.

Permissible Acts

There are a number of acts that do not harm or affect the fast whatsoever. These are called permissible acts. Below are some examples.

(a) It is permissible to wear perfume while fasting. But women are not allowed to do so if they intend to go out in public. In fact, that act is neither permissible during Ramadan nor at other times.

(b) There is no harm in brushing one's teeth with a siwak or a brush. It is best, however, to avoid toothpaste while fasting because if you swallow any of it, even inadvertently, you will have broken your fast.

(c) Absentminded eating or drinking does not break the fast; in fact the Prophet (ﷺ) described it as **"a provision which God has brought upon you."**

(d) It is also permissible to kiss your spouse, if you can control yourself and not allow this to lead you to further, prohibited acts.